

Ottawa, Queen's Park spar over scrapping cap-and-trade; Alberta vows to pull out of climate plan after court quashes approval of Trans Mountain

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Body

Premier Doug Ford's scrapping of cap-and-trade could add the equivalent annual pollution of 30 coal-fired power plants within a dozen years, a new federal government analysis concludes.

The findings obtained by the Star warn that Ford's decision to end Ontario's environmental alliance with Quebec and California might lead to 48.8 million tonnes of additional carbon emissions each year by 2030.

"To put that in real terms, this is equivalent to the carbon pollution from over 30 new coal-fired plants," federal Liberal Environment Minister Catherine McKenna wrote to provincial Progressive Conservative Environment Minister Rod Phillips.

But Phillips, who is part of the Ford government's constitutional challenge against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's carbon-pricing system, countered McKenna's claim.

"Your letter suggests our government's elimination of cap-and-trade will significantly increase carbon pollution," the Ontario minister wrote Thursday.

"I reject that assertion outright, as it suggests Ontario will have no plan going forward, which is not the case," he said. "We understand that climate change is real, that human beings have an impact on the climate, and that, collectively, we must take action."

But McKenna pointed out that by axing cap-and-trade, which generated \$1.9 billion to the province to fund environmental initiatives like subsidizing electric cars and retrofitting homes and offices, emissions will increase. The federal analysis is based on the fact that without the previous greenhouse gas reduction measures, Ontario's planned target of 114.2 million tonnes of emissions for 2030 will be closer to 163 million tonnes, a 48.8 million tonne difference.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's greenhouse gas equivalencies calculator, that equates to adding another 10.2 million gasoline-powered vehicles onto Ontario roads - or doubling the number of cars and trucks already registered in the province.

But Ottawa's contention presumes the new government, which is expected table its own climate change plan later this year, would do nothing to curb emissions.

"That represents almost double the pollution that was eliminated through Ontario's celebrated coal phase-out, completed under the previous government, which saw smog days across the province drop from 53 to zero," said McKenna, referring to former Liberal premiers Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne.

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"We need to understand as soon as possible how your government will address the projected 48-million-tonne increase in pollution that the previous Ontario government had a plan to reduce," the federal minister wrote Wednesday.

"It's unfortunate that your government has ended Ontario's climate action, including by cancelling energy efficiency programs that were helping Ontario families, schools, businesses and communities save energy and money," she said.

"Many of these programs were being supported through the federal government's \$420-million allocation for Ontario as part of the Low Carbon Economy Leadership Fund, and were supporting good middle class jobs and helping small businesses grow."

In response, Phillips said "it is clear that our governments disagree on the merits of the carbon tax."

"However, there is common ground in acknowledging the need to proactively address climate change. This includes working together and with our provincial-territorial partners through the Pan-Canadian Framework," the provincial minister said.

Phillips noted the Tory government was elected June 7 "with a mandate from the people of Ontario to conclude the province's cap-and-trade program."

"As we have discussed, our opposition to carbon taxation does not indicate a lack of commitment to address climate change."

He emphasized that the PC government's new "made-in-Ontario plan" will build on the reductions that have come since 2005.

Emissions are down 22 per cent since that time.

But that's thanks largely to the former Liberal government's phasing out of coal-fired generation, including the Nanticoke plant that was decommissioned five years ago. It was the largest coal plant in North America and by far the biggest polluter in Ontario.

Because the province withdrew from its two-year cap-and-trade alliance with Quebec and California, it will no longer be exempt from the new federal carbon-pricing regime to begin in 2019.

Ford's government is spending up to \$30 million challenging the constitutionality of Ottawa imposing any carbon levy.

That action was filed with the Ontario Court of Appeal earlier this month.

NDP MPP Ian Arthur (Kingston and the Islands) said the Tories have not thought through the ramifications of their moves.

"It's clear that by cancelling cap-and-trade with no replacement environmental protection program, Ford is doing long-term damage to our province," said Arthur.

"The kicker is that Ontarians are actually going to have to pay extra for Ford's war on the environment - from the end of green programs that put more money in their pockets, to being on the hook for billions of dollars in penalties and lawsuits over ripped up contracts," he said.

"This is not even taking into consideration the long-term costs and impacts climate change will have on our economy and communities. Ontarians are really paying the price for Ford to help out big polluters."

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